

„Amicable Alices. Lewis Carroll and his Child Friends.” *The Politics and Poetics of Friendship*. Eds. Ewa Kowal and Robert Kusek. Krakow: Jagellonian University Press, 2017. 223-239.

Anna Kérchy

### Amicable Alices: Lewis Carroll and his Child Friends<sup>1</sup>

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson has gained reputation as a controversial figure of Victorian English literature. He was an Anglican deacon, a professor of mathematics at Oxford, a pioneer portrait photographer, an avid pamphletist, a member of the Royal Society of Psychic Research, and an amateur magician and inventor. Yet he is most widely remembered today for the nonsense fairy-tale fantasies he wrote about *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice Found There* (1871) under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll. No critical consensus has been reached concerning the appropriate reading of his fiction. His Alice novels can be interpreted as anti-didactic children's literature, language philosophical manifestos, lessons in symbolic logic, social critical allegories, or clandestine autobiographical confessions. Yet, his authorial persona remains just as much of an enigma defined primarily along the lines of his friendship with – what he called – his “child friends.” Retrospective speculations toy with the ideas of his having been a repressed paedophile (Becker Lennon 1945), an asexual bachelor (Cohen 1995), a high functioning autistic (Fitzgerald 2004), or a *puer eternus* character (Robson 2001) whose self was determined by the amorous, intellectual, ludic or narcissistic relationship with the young girls he befriended, and especially Alice Liddell, for whom he improvised his famous tale on a boating trip.

The making of the Carroll myth can be scrutinized along the lines of Foucault's understanding of the “name of the author” as a textual function put in the service of canon formation that guarantees by means of a trademark the authenticity and value of a text inserted within a homogenised corpus of artworks (Foucault 1998: 211). Although the author function is more of a socio-cultural construct than a projection of the real life figure of the writer, the notion “Carrollian” has become deeply rooted in popular cultural discourse with misinterpreted biographical data used to delimit the vertiginous proliferation of meanings by reducing the ambiguous significations of the Alice tales to symptomatic documentary evidence of the writer's child-loving.

My essay traces the critical, biographical, and autobiographical representations of the friendships Carroll cultivated with his child muses. I focus on the canonical constitution and literary historical revisions of Carroll's authorial persona, reminiscences of famous underage

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friends (including Alice Liddell and Isa Bowman), as well as Carroll’s correspondence and diary entries on child acquaintances. This textual corpus offers a glimpse at the changing nature of cultural stereotypes associated with the friendly ties between an adult (man) and a (girl) child in the Victorian period and the (post)modern era. It allows us to explore the idealistic and the ominous implications of this intergenerational bonding, depending on which mode of affective relationality the friendship is associated with conforming to the classic Greek typology of “loving” (*agape, eros, philia, storge*). I reveal how Carroll’s emotional ties with child friends served as a vital creative engine for his literary writings, and in particular his Alice tales. The story about Wonderland is an odd piece of children’s literature: it narrates the adventures of a lonely, “friendless” little girl wandering in unfamiliar, unfriendly environments, yet the book has become canonised as an homage to friendship immortalised by art.

The image of Carroll as a child-lover originates from a posthumous mythologisation crafted by his first official biographer, his nephew, Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, with the intention to preserve the purity of the authorial persona of the famous artist as a token of the untarnished reputation he had established in Victorian culture as a children’s writer. Collingwood devoted two lengthy chapters of his 1898 biography and dedicated the book to Carroll’s child friends and argued that one could understand neither Carroll’s character nor his oeuvre without realising the significance of his “exquisite fondness” of children (Collingwood 1898: 416). The idea of the modest, devout, eccentric, imaginative Carroll as the best friend of little girls perfectly suited the Victorian frame of mind where the child was considered an embodiment of angelic innocence, a state of grace, as well as beauty in its pure, ideal form, and as such as a source of artistic inspiration, a mediator between the artist and aesthetic cultivation and spiritual elevation. In that period child-loving earned respect instead of moral panic (Lebailly 1998). Carroll’s obituary in *London Daily Graphic* noted with admiration that the late artist “like many bachelors, was very popular with children and very fond of them” (Woolf 2010).

Collingwood explains Carroll’s attraction to child friends with pedagogical, aesthetic, and spiritual reasons. Firstly, he was “pre-eminently a teacher, and he saw in their unspoiled minds the best material for him to work upon” and his pupils were fond of him because he gave personal attention to each of them (Collingwood 1898: 361). Secondly “children appealed to his aesthetic faculties, for he was a keen admirer of untarnished ‘white innocence’ [purity] both in its physical and spiritual form” (362). Thirdly, he “loved children because

their friendship was the true source of his perennial youth and unflagging vigour,” a “blessing and help in [his] life” (364).

While the first and the last reasons seem acceptable, the second sounds suspicious for contemporary audiences. Worshipping the beauty of the Other, even if yearning for the spiritual truth of ideal form, is dangerously close to the sexual desire involved in erotic love, *Eros* in Greek terminology. Collingwood’s description of Carroll as an avid collector of child friends with whom the author’s relationship ended when they came of age, his penchant for hugging, kissing, and teasing the little girls, his fetishistic commemoration of beloved body parts (a loose lock of hair, a scraped knee or a tiny birthmark), and his insistence on sharing intimate moments together isolated from the rest of the world – today sheds a different light on the figure of the shy, stuttering, unmarried clergyman scholar, socially maladroit with adults and at ease only in the company of children to whom he paid tribute in many art forms including fiction, puzzles, toys, and photography (Kérchy 2016).

The retrospective eroticisation of Carroll’s friendship with children is rooted in the myth initiated by Collingwood, as well as in misreadings of ambiguous episodes of the artist’s life – missing diary pages, his mysterious break with the Liddell family, his “unholy thoughts” oddly confessed in the introduction to *Curiosa Mathematica* II, and his pioneering photographic work including prepubescent girl (semi)nude portraits. These comprised only thirty images out of a corpus of 3000 shots (only 1% of the oeuvre), but were put in the forefront by the curator of the first exhibition of Carroll’s visual works and later became diagnosed as symptomatic manifestations of their maker’s sinful lust. Psychoanalytical analysis – Goldschmidt’s influential essay possibly a hoax – tracked in Carroll’s fiction textual indices of “subconscious abnormal emotions of a considerable strength” (Goldschmidt 1977: 70) and solidified the modern notion of Carroll as a repressed sexual deviant, “a Casanova of the Victorian nursery” (Haughton 1998: xxvi), a Nabokovian Humbert Humbert-like satyr, luring his game with “a black bag full of toys and gifts to woo little girls, plus a supply of safety pins to hitch up the skirts of those who agreed to paddle in the surf” (Wulfschlager 36). Ironically, even critical attempts at challenging the child-loving myth, such as Karoline Leach’s *In the Shadow of the Dream Child* (1999), continue Carroll’s resexualisation, mapping his relations with adult female friends to relocate “the artist as a serial sexual adulterer,” thus conforming to the standards of a heteronormative sexual economy that deems promiscuous sexual (hyper)activity to be a desirable manly feature.

A biographical explanation of Carroll's friendship with young girls relies on his blissful childhood spent with seven younger sisters whom the future author entertained with games he invented and nonsense fantasies published in their family magazine. As Catherine Robson demonstrates in her *Men in Wonderland. The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (2001), in the Victorian society an idealised, fully phantasmagorical girlhood effaced the actual past boyhood self. For Victorian men, girls provided a “logical intermediary” (Roth 2009: 24) and an ideal imaginative terrain for escapist fantasies of relived childhood experiences. The initial stage of male development (the first six years spent in the protective “feminine aura” (Robson 2001: 4) of the nursery) carried feminine features – both physically (closeness to the maternal realm, girlish clothing worn by the children of both sexes) and psychically (vulnerability, gentleness) – which boys had to learn to suppress throughout their maturation into men. Hence the imaginative feminisation of childhood supported adult male authors' feelings of irredeemable loss, melancholic yearning, and emotionally nostalgic worship. These affects – still characteristic of Western society's cultural construct of childhood – emerge in the prefatory and *dénouement* poetic passages in both Alice sequels. Besides a narcissistic introspection, what is implied here is a fatherly relation to one's past childhood self or a romanticist celebration, in a Wordsworthian mode, of the child as a father of man. This familial love based on an instinctive, natural affection that the parent feels towards the offspring, which the Greek call *Storge*, provides foundation for (imaginary) friendship fuelled by the love of the self in the Other.

The biographical recollections of Carroll's child friends all confirm the innocent and mutually devoted nature of the artist's creative partnership with his underage muses by describing their friendship along the lines of familial *Storge* love, denoting Carroll with kinship terms, referring to him as a “fairy godfather” (Alice Liddell [in:] Douglas-Fairhurst 2015: 409), a “dear Uncle” (Bowman 1972: 3) or a long lost beloved paternal figure (Mrs Maitland [in:] Collingwood 1898: 426). Diversions turned delightful routine trace a pattern in Carroll's friendship with children: he took them to short trips, rowing expeditions, picnics, sea side tours, cultural events like theatre performances, museum visits, or meetings with famous artists; he organised them fancy-dress parties and *tableau-vivant* photo sessions, taught them amusing arithmetic, made them strange toys or did magic tricks, and entertained them with storytelling sessions, improvised tales decorated with funny illustrations, rebus letters and witty correspondences. His unique fantasising skills made him a favourite among little friends, and parents also shared the assumption that his carefree imaginativeness was a proof

of his gift for understanding the infantile spirit strictly disciplined by the Victorian society but let loose in his non-didactic nonsense fairy-tale fantasies which radically reformed the traditionally didactic genre of children’s literature.

Carroll met Alice Liddell – the daughter of the dean of Christ Church College where Carroll taught during his entire lifetime – when she was five and marked the day in his diary with a White Stone as a memorable date that indeed proved to be influential for his whole life. It was for Alice that he invented a tale at a boating trip in the bright summer of 1862; he presented her the gift book the next Christmas, and had it published by Macmillan with the illustrations by Punch cartoonist John Tenniel in 1865, a date that marks the birth of Lewis Carroll – storyteller, friend of all children, an authorial persona that came to overshadow the real life figure of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. In her reminiscences, Alice called Carroll a “brilliant logician,” “great mathematician with an intricate mind,” a “fairy godfather” whose irresistible stories no child could ever forget (Douglas-Fairhurst 2015: 246; Liddell 1932: 12). Possibly as a tribute to *Storge* love, Alice named one of her sons Caryl, which is homonymous with the famous pseudonym. This son (she lost her other two sons in war) accompanied her in 1932, at the centennial of Dodgson’s birth, to New York, where Columbia University awarded eighty-year-old Alice an honorary doctorate of letters by means of the most genuine celebration of this memorable friendship that inspired a “truly noteworthy contribution to English literature” (Hond 2009). In professor Harry Morgan Ayres’ eulogy Alice was praised for “awaking with her girlhood’s charm the ingenious fancy of a mathematician familiar with imaginary quantities, stirring him to reveal his complete understanding of the heart of a child” (Hond 2009). The making of Wonderland was acknowledged as a collective feat, and the real Alice was honoured for her role in the creation of a national treasure.

Just a few months after Collingwood’s influential and extremely popular biography of Carroll, a little book was published in 1899, entitled *The Story of Lewis Carroll told for Young People by the Real Alice in Wonderland* (later retitled *Lewis Carroll as I Knew Him*). However, surprisingly, it was not authored by Alice Liddell herself, but the actress Isa Bowman who impersonated Alice on stage in the theatrical adaptation of the Wonderland novel, was the addressee of *Sylvie and Bruno*’s dedication (Carroll spelt out her name in the acrostic prefatory poem), and who first decided to record in a memoir her recollections of a tender friendship she developed as a child friend with Carroll, “her dear Uncle.” Her emotional reminiscence of a “great professor” and “his little girl,” this “curious” couple’s

(Bowman 1972: 3) adventures combines a plausible account of their shared experiences (summer outings to the seaside, visits to Eastbourne and Brighton, acting classes and theatre visits arranged for her, an abundant correspondence, and a break after her wedding in 1894), with sentimental assessments full of admiration of a retrospectively recognised genius.

Isa’s amorous confessions border on rhetoric of the romance genre with lines such as

The shifting firelight seemed to aetherialise that kindly face and as the wonderful stories fell from his lips, and his eyes lighted on me with the sweetest smile that ever a man wore, I was conscious of a love and reverence for Charles Dodgson that became nearly an adoration. (36)

Another vivid mental picture of hers recalls Carroll musing on the peak of a cliff absorbed in a sublime panorama he can only share with the child friend muse, a silent companion to his epiphanic moment of spiritual elevation:

Just as the sun was setting, and a cool breeze whispered round us, he would take off his hat and let the wind play with his hair, and he would look out to sea. Once I saw tears in his eyes, and when we turned to go he gripped my hand much tighter than usual. (74)

Secret details about the recently deceased distinguished author’s private life and personal peculiarities are just as much evidence of the intimate nature of this special friendship with Isa as are Carroll’s many letters sent to the girl, the diary he mockingly wrote in her place (*Isa’s Visit in Oxford*, 1888), or the private jokes they shared. But they also resemble the sensationalist agenda of a celebrity biography. Isa describes “dear Uncle’s” legendary shyness and stammer, his vestimentary preferences, memorable specimens of his toy collection, their favourite touristic spots, the author’s eccentricities such as his insistence on always wearing gloves, his daily visits to the dentist, his dislike of being photographed, and his extreme pedantry.

As Leach’s 2009 demythologising book suggests, Isa Bowman’s sketches of Carroll as a charming, passionate, eccentric man aim at authenticity but end up reinforcing naturalised contentions about Carroll’s child loving, slyly oblivious of the fact that Isa was already thirteen when she met the fifty-five-year-old Oxford don in 1887. In that light, even Isa’s term of endearment “dear Uncle” and Carroll’s self-designation in their correspondence as an Aged Aged Man (mockingly abbreviated to AAM) rings suspicious to Leach who hears in the

phrasing an echo of the Victorian euphemism for an older, richer, male lover. I believe that Leach makes an important point here, but draws erroneous conclusions. In my view, the fact that Carroll was a middle aged bachelor and Isa a young lady in her mid-teens during their time spent together should not be interpreted as a sign of their sexual availability and potential erotic ties, but as an indicator of the unique freedom which this friendship offered to them as a release from their era's rigid social expectations, codes of conduct and moral confines.

As Cohen highlights, Carroll's view about the age of child friends changed over time: while “Dream Child” soul mate Alice is portrayed as seven years old in the *Wonderland* book, in an 1877 letter to the publisher (Macmillan) he “put the nicest age at about 17,” called elsewhere in his correspondence Irene Barnes a child friend about eighteen (Letter to Patmore [in:] Hatch 1933: 222), and later wrote that some of his “dearest child-friends are 30 or more” (Cohen 1995: 462). Just how much Carroll did use the designation “child friend” in a rather broad, general sense is illustrated by the preface to *Nursery Alice*, an adaptation in colour for pre-readers:

I have reason to believe that “Alice's Adventures in Wonderland” has been read by some hundreds of *English Children, aged from Five to Fifteen*: also by children, aged from fifteen to twenty-five, and even by children, for there are such – children of a certain age whose tale of years must be left untold, and buried in respectful silence. (Carroll [in:] Jaques and Giddens 2013: 62)

Many child friends recalled as the most rewarding feature of their friendship with Carroll the ability to remain a child forever. As the letter of Gertrude Chataway (to whom the author dedicated *The Hunting of the Snark*) quoted in Collingwood stated, “He never appeared to realise that I had grown up, except when I reminded him of the fact, and then he only said, ‘Never mind: you will always be a child to me, even when your hair is grey’” (Chataway [in:] Collingwood 1898: 380). The extended childhood granted to the girls and young women whom Carroll befriended had nothing to do with the infantilisation resulting in objectification, eroticisation, and expectations of docile submissiveness associated with femininity emblematised by the iconic Victorian figure of the “angel in the house.” Rather, it appeared as a manifestation of “caring as a matter of bestowing values on the beloved” (child)friend (Helm 2013) associated with inherent and inalienable merits of unrestrained imaginative free play, ludic liberty, uncorrupted innocence, and a penchant for empathic

sharing of fantasies rebelling against the yoke of rational consensus reality. It was also a cunning way to elude the social discipline afflicting all grown-ups, and in a more philosophical sense, a trick to fight the passing of time by a playful (illusory yet liberating) promise of eternity, a therapeutic means for overcoming the painful burden of the awareness of aging, vulnerability, and mortality.

Returning to the classic Greek typology of love, post-Freudian criticism read Carroll's friendship with children in terms of erotic ties (*Eros*) and child friends reinterpreted their intimate bonds along the lines of familial affections (*Storge*). Carroll himself evaluated his relationship with his young muses as the most precious manifestation of *Philia*, an affectionate regard, a distinctive concern, a trustful understanding, a mutual support, a dispassionate virtuous love between equals that requires loyalty, solidarity, familiarity, and freedom. This is the definition of Friendship described by Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII) as a relation grounded in pleasure, utility, and virtue resulting from reciprocal caring, intimacy, shared activities, and mutual inspiration. Carroll's contemporary, the Bishop of Winchester, Anthony Thorold, lists in an 1896 pamphlet eight purposes of friendship: counsel, defence, appreciation, correction, society, intercession, aid, sympathy, and takes as an exemplary model Christ's love for his apostles that combines intimacy of companionship with readiness for self-sacrifice (Oulton 2007: 7). However, for Carroll his relations with his child friends are freely chosen and necessarily mutual ties. *Agape*, the unconditional love of God for man and of man for God – which the Bishop of Winchester regards to be an exemplary model of friendship – is a moral imperative for the religious man. *Storge* love is an evolutionary necessity between people connected by genetic and family heritage. *Eros* is a social demand supported by the myths of Romantic love and the heteronormative reproductive economy of desire. The *Philia* of Friendship is the only love based on the free choice of both parties involved: whereas unrequited love or affect in an arranged marriage are conceptually possible, in my view, it is senseless to talk about unrequited or forced friendship.

Carroll's abundant correspondence with his child friends – always conducted with parental consent – was far from one-sided. Sometimes witty, sometimes schoolgirlish responses were sent to his letters often addressed to “my dear Child” and signed “your affectionate friend,” but they never failed to stimulate his imagination to create amusing replies driven by a desire for psychological identification with the child's mind rather than a physical union with the recipient. The letters attest that Carroll's friendships were based on



mutual trust by which he felt deeply honoured.<sup>2</sup> Carroll did not hesitate to release his child correspondents from the burden of the exclusivity of their special friendship. To Edith Rix he described his excursions with Phoebe a “very sweet and thoughtful” child (Hatch 1933: 195). Evelyn Hatch, who, after his death, edited a selection of his letters to his child friends, recalled how child actors Marrion and Ellen Terry whom he befriended sent photographs, bouquets of flowers, and other affections to the child-friends he took to the theatre (10). To Kathleen Eschwle he mockingly boasted in his trademark nonsense style:

Well, so I hope I may now count you as one of my child-friends. I am fond of children (except boys), and have more child-friends than I could possibly count on my fingers, even if I were a centipede (by the way, *have* they fingers? I’m afraid they’re only feet, but, of course, they use them for the same purpose, and that is why no other insects, *except centipedes*, ever succeed in doing *Long Multiplication*), and I have several not so very far from you – one at Beckenham, two at Balham, two at Herne Hill, one at Peckham – so there is every chance of my being somewhere near you *before the year* 1979. If so, may I call? (Carroll [in:] Collingwood 1898: 416)

While child friends were fond of Carroll because like a fairy Godfather he promised them eternal youth, Carroll’s melancholic personality likely appreciated these relationships because of their transience. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, intense friendship was associated with women and the very young, and was presumed to pass with the coming-of-age, when the ephemeral union between friends was rightly replaced by the intimate relation of marriage meant to last for a lifetime. Carolyn Oulton writes in her book about romantic friendship between Victorian women that girls’ friendship was regarded as an ephemeral precursor of heterosexual love, a socially permitted way for a young female to prove her sensibility, as a token of a responsive nature towards potential future male suitors; it was seen as a rehearsal for the “happily ever after” of the socially approved heteronormative wedlock. Same-sex friendship with another girl and friendship with a presumably asexual clergyman scholar were probably evaluated in a similar manner: it was promoted as essential for the development of social and spiritual qualities but its ultimate end was foreseen as an inevitable necessity. In the Victorian novelistic tradition friendship between the opposite sexes was difficult if not impossible to

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<sup>2</sup> To Edith Rix he wrote: “And now I come to the most interesting part of your letter: May you treat me as a perfect friend, and write anything you like me, and ask my advice? Why, of course you may, my child, what else am I good for?” (Carroll [in:] Hatch 1933: 195).

articulate and maintain; according to narrative conventions, it gave way to other forms of intimate union, including the sinful affair, the sanctioned romance, or heavenly salvation (Luftig 1995: 58).

Carroll's contemporary, Dinah Maria Mulock Craik in *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1857) called "Friendship rather a kind of foreshadowing of love [...] a dream to melt away like a dream when love disappears" (Craik 1857: 12). This idea is echoed in an episode of *Through the Looking Glass* where the description of Alice's encounter with the White Knight, commonly interpreted as a fictional self-portrait of Carroll, is disrupted by a sudden flash forward to her future life, from where, as a grown-up, she looks back upon her childhood journey, and she sees herself freeze-framed as a little girl contemplating "the mild blue eyes and kindly smile of the Knight – the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light that quite dazzled her [...] – and the black shadows of the forest behind" (Carroll 2001: 256). Carroll's visionary narrative reveals via a complex *mise-en-abyme* a "double vision of the child watching the adult Knight, and the adult Alice who is remembering" (Robson 2001: 149) having been the child watching the adult Knight watching her. Carroll projected his own feelings on his heroine by having adult Alice look back on her childhood friendship overwhelmed by melancholic affects of loss and yearning. The strange pair in Carroll's correspondence refers to himself and his protégés, as a line to Edith Rix attests: "Of course, there isn't *much* companionship possible, after all, between an old man's mind and a little child's, but what there is is sweet – and wholesome, I think" (Collingwood 1898: 413).

The bonds between Carroll and his child friends met the dictionary definition of friendship as a relationship based on mutual affection, understanding, and support between people who share common interests, occupations, and values, who enjoy each other's company, but are also connected by special quasi-spiritual, affective ties guaranteed by a mutual trust that allows them to be themselves, to freely exchange their thoughts and feelings, make mistakes and honestly reveal their vulnerabilities without fear of judgment, while loyally committing to supporting the happiness of each other.

Carroll generously acknowledged the considerable impact which his child friends had had on his art, reevaluating the conventional artist and muse hierarchy on more democratic terms. In his photographs, the child models represented abstract ideas, but all of them had their names precisely indicated in the titles to commemorate their underage female co-authorship, and sometimes he even had them sign their portraits: Irene McDonald's school-

girlish handwriting introduced the trace of her own voice into his image-text. He likely would have given his consent to Evelyn Hatch who posthumously edited his letters written to his child-friends, as her intervention in the establishment of his authorial heritage duly commemorated the addressees' significance in the formation of his creative imagination. Heraldizing the success of his Alice books he wrote: “we have sold more than 120,000 of the two” possibly referring to Alice as catalyst (and not only the publisher Macmillan or the illustrator Tenniel) as his chief collaborator (Carroll [in:] Sundmark 1999: 165, my emphasis – A.K.).

In Wonderland's prefatory poem, Carroll shared the credit for artistic creativity with his child friends who emerged as co-authors through a rhetorical gesture that employed the first person plural personal pronoun “we” in a recollection of the tale's genesis, the famous rowing expedition with the “merry crew” (Carroll 2001: 8), i.e. the three Liddell sisters, all inspirationally involved in the “communal story-making” (Gubar 2010: 96). Marah Gubar suggests that children can gain only temporary empowerment as collaborators, because the power imbalance is preserved between two generations in the adult-child relationship, and reciprocity remains a fraudulent illusion, a sham, due to the classic dedicatory move (“Alice, this childish story take!”) by which Carroll finally recuperates his control over the story, affirmatively positioning himself as the author and Alice (and her sisters, Lorina and Edith) as the audience.

However, I believe that Alice is very far from a mere mute corporeal presence, and her character is identified by a liberated loquaciousness, a vivid verbal interactivity, a “willingness to interact with the world around, chatting with every creature she encounters” (Gubar 2010: 96), no matter how odd they seem or sound. Her sisters, too, alternatively “flash forth (the) edit ‘to begin it’,” “interrupt the tale not more than once a minute,” urge that “there will be nonsense in it” (Carroll 2001: 7), and seem to fundamentally determine the flow of the story. Carroll is handling the oars and the quill, but the little girls are dictating the direction. A “joyous cacophony” (Gubar 2010: 96) of many charming female child friends' tongues underlies and undoes the adult male authorial voice's self-discipline: the Liddell girls' clever and curious, uninhibited, spontaneous interventions shape the plot, style, and influence the manner of creation of the nonsense fairy-tale fantasy “extemporised for their benefit” (Carroll 2001: 7).

Twenty-five years later, in “Alice On the Stage” (1887) Carroll recalls how, while inventing the whimsical tale during a boating trip, “fancies unsought came crowding thick

upon him,” at “times when the jaded Muse was goaded into action, and plodded meekly on, more because she had to say something than that she had something to say,” as he “sent [his] heroine straight down a rabbit-hole, to begin with, without the least idea what was to happen afterwards.” (Carroll 2011 [1887]: 233) He identifies his improvisatory stream of tales – originating from capricious mental operations fleeing all rational control or premediated artistic design – in terms of fancy’s infantilised and feminised creative agency. The emotional motivation behind the “extempore romance” (Collingwood [in:] Cohen 91) – “to please the child I loved” (Carroll 2011 [1887]: 233) – is so powerful that the novelistic rewriting of the oral version keeps the features of fancy described in his metafictional reminiscences, to mirror the muse’s musings.

Although Carroll calls himself a Poet who gave his readers the best he had to offer, he compulsively repeats the tautological expressions of his “words coming and growing by themselves” and hence renounces complete authority over his text. He suggests that the impetus facilitating and fuelling his writing, the passion, the inspiration, and even the will for its preservation, came from others, namely Alice Liddell, “one of little listeners who petitioned that the tale might be written out for her” (Carroll 2011 [1887]: 233), the fellow-fantast George McDonald’s daughter, Mary, his little reader who encouraged the publication of the book, and further child friends to whom he wrote unpublished extensions of Wonderland in the many letters sent to them. In my view, these Carrollian child friends are more of initiative agents than passive foundations of the adult male author’s “writerly text.” Thus, child friends’ “tongues and ears” – both carefree and caring ways of “girlish” storytelling, listening and fantasising – constitute the metonymic kernel of Carroll’s fictional self-portrait as Alice.

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